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Hamit Bozarslan

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When the Present Sends Back to the Past: Reading the Kurdish Issue in the 2010s

HAMIT BOZARSLAN
École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France

ABSTRACT *Since 2011, the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and its anti-Kurdish violence, the new cold war of Iran and Russia versus Turkey, and the Tayyip Erdogan regime's coercive policies against the Kurds both in Turkey and Syria, entirely have redefined the century-long Kurdish issue in the Middle East. It also has affected deeply the Kurdish political elite and constrained it to remilitarize the Kurdish conflict and society. How does this elite define the Kurdish issue after years of stasis in Iraq and in Syria? Which senses does it give to the crisis of the previously strong Westphalian states in the region? How does the Kurdish trans-border space reconfigure itself amid heavy external and internal tensions? This article, which takes note that a long historical cycle starting with Mustafa Barzani's rebellion in 1961, and a shorter one, that started with the 1991 Gulf War, will discuss the issue of the reconfiguration of the Kurdish political elite after the Arab revolutionary uprisings of 2011.*

KEY WORDS: *Anfal campaign; Masoud Barzani; Saddam Husayn; Iran; Iraq; Kurdistan; Mahabad Republic; Ottoman Empire; Syria; Turkey*

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The 1991 Gulf War, the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian civil war, which started in 2011, all have posed serious challenges to what one could call the Middle-Eastern regional 'sub-system' established in the Levant by France and Great Britain after the Great War of 1914–1918. To be sure, the current crisis is not the first one the region has experienced. However, except during the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, in other past crises, the inter-state boundaries have been preserved in spite of their transformation into production zones of massive violence. Yet, although in some cases weakened, the states continued to have effective control over their 'Westphalian spaces of sovereignty.' With some exceptions, such as the refugee waves following the Palestinian *nakba*, or those that took place in the wake of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1989) and the Anfal operations in Iraqi Kurdistan (1988), the basic demographic tissue also remained unchanged in the region.

During the crises of the first decades of the twenty-first century, however, not only have the inter-state boundaries lost their function of delineating the 'zones of violence' of the states,[1] but also new and highly militarized internal frontiers have appeared in some countries, including Iraq and Syria. More than half of the Syrian population and an equal proportion of the Iraqi Sunni Arabs either have been displaced or forced into exile. There is no doubt that some of the external and internal, state, intra-state and supra-state dynamics that have been

Correspondence Address: Hamit Bozarslan, EHESS, 54 Bd Raspail, 75006 Paris, France. Email: Hamit.Bozarslan@ehess.fr

[1] Anthony Giddens (1987) *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press), p. 120.

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decisive in the making and unmaking of the Middle East throughout the twentieth century either have disappeared or weakened. However, one also has the strong impression that some other dynamics dating back to the region's pre-World War I imperial past have been reactivated in an entirely new context. For instance, Iran and Turkey have imposed themselves as regional powers during conflicts in the 2010s and through their interventions in Syria in 2015. More surprisingly, Russia has shown its ability to mobilize its nineteenth-century references in order to avenge its defeat in the Cold War.

This is also true as far as the Kurdish issue is concerned. It is obvious that many inter-state and intra-state parameters that determined the evolution of this issue before the Iraq War in 1991 have vanished, at least for the time being. The place that the states and the Kurdish movements occupy in the Middle East of the 2010s is indeed very different from the one they had occupied in the 1980s. Such fundamental notions as 'borders,' 'security forces,' 'national economies' or 'state's centralities' do not over-determine the evolution of the Kurdish issue in Iraq and in Syria anymore. These two major states, which played an absolutely decisive role in the evolution of the Kurdish issue during long decades, have ceased to be the relevant actors in the 2010s. That does not mean, however, that some other dynamics, including those going back to an imperial past, are not or could not be re-activated in entirely new contexts. For instance, the internal fragmentation of the Kurdish space, which is a legacy of the past, both imperial and post-imperial, continues to determine the evolution of this issue in the 2010s. The bifurcation that one observes between the two Kurdish entities that are building in Iraq and in Syria is a clear proof of this fact.

Thus, in the analysis of the Kurdish issue one should take into account both the long-term historical continuities and the transformative effects of the new and often violent configurations that determine the decision-making process of the Kurdish and non-Kurdish actors. The retrospective reading that I propose in this article does not naturally advocate for a casual or linear model of explanation, but rather it aims to understand what remains from the past and potentially can be reactivated as a pertinent pattern today, and the new fields of action opened by the ongoing processes of de- and re-compositions in the region.

Defining the Kurdish Issue in the Twentieth Century and Today

Throughout the twentieth century, the Kurdish issue had different meanings for the Kurdish movements, the states, and the world powers. For the Kurds it was, before everything else, the issue of their unsatisfied demand to become masters of their own destiny and to obtain the right to have their own say on who they thought they were in history or in any given present-time, and who they wanted to be in the future. They have struggled to obtain this right often under extremely coercive circumstances, either peacefully whenever this was possible, or through use of violence. It is true that the present situation in the Middle East is marked by a relative and fragile empowerment of Kurdish actors at least in Iraq and in Syria, but the Kurdish issue still poses this very basic demand: To have the right to be in space, that means in the four 'Kurdistans,' and in time, in other words in the past, in the present and in the future, with the Kurds' own words, subjectivities, wills, dreams and political and administrative formulae. To some extent, here as elsewhere in world history, the 'present' is the key slice of time allowing for the re-interpretation of the past and re-imagining the future. I therefore will pay specific attention in this article to the readings that the Kurdish movements developed in each historical configuration which brought previously unknown constraints, but also, in some cases, unexpected opportunities. The 'hard facts' of the past, that survive as a legacy that no one can deny, still constitute one of the main determinants

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of the Kurdish issue in the years since 2010, but certainly not a mastodon able to destroy any other dynamic unleashed by the new region-wide processes.

Before analyzing the post-2011 situation in the Middle East and Kurdistan, this article will present a very brief overview of the imperial centuries. Analyzing the dialectic of division and unity, it also will try to offer some explanatory factors for the emergence of the Kurdish issue as a national one during the post-World War I era. The final section of the article will analyze the evolution of the Kurdish issue in the wake of the collapse of the Westphalian state-model in the Middle-East in the 2010s and the unprecedented challenges that this development poses to a relatively empowered but structurally fragile trans-border Kurdish movement.

The Imperial Legacy: Division and Unity

One of the main features defining the Kurdish issue in the twentieth century has been the division of Kurds among four states. It is obvious that this separation along militarized state-borders has constituted one of the structural factors behind the Kurdish armed contests, both political and non-political. The trans-border economic transactions that the states' authorities defined as smuggling activities, for instance, constituted the basic prerequisite for maintaining the group's unity and often required use of violence. The 'division' also has been a structuring theme of Kurdish history-writing, as well as Kurdish collective memory, literature, and cinema. However, one also needs to recognize that the inter-state frontiers constituted a serious challenge to the Kurds not *per se*, or simply because they divided them among four countries, but because the states which were the main beneficiaries and guarantors of this regional sub-system aimed at the homogenization of their populations and transformation of their Westphalian boundaries into non-fluid and exclusive frontiers.

The division of the Kurds in fact dates back to an almost millennium-long imperial past. Under the unified Arab and subsequent Mameluke rule, which integrated many non-Arab communities, the Kurds had a fragmented, yet secure existence. Despite their division, and in conformity with an already well-established political code, the Ayyubid dynasty, which had a strong Kurdish *asabiyya* but was also the forbearer of an Islamic *da'wa*, even imposed itself as the ruling force of the Muslim Empire. As Boris James shows, the division of the Kurds between two empires, or at least vaguely defined imperial spaces, took place at the same time as the division of the Eastern Muslim world between different forces, the Mamelukes on the one side, the Seljuks and (later on) the Mongols on the other.[2] These imperial forces had quite distinct features: The Mamelukes, who had a long ruling experience in the region and were able to map and deal with the ethnic and tribal pluralism of their Empire, were in a process of withdrawal. Seljuks and Mongols could be much more brutal in their modes of subordination. Still, they were able to dominate the newly Islamized territories, i.e., parts of Iran and Minor Asia, before preparing the ground for the sixteenth-century Iranian and Ottoman imperial entities. The confrontation of these powers took place while the Kurdish *asabiyya*, which reached its maximal expansion under Saladin (1138–1193), could not have an overwhelming weight in the regional power equation. The survival of the Kurds was, paradoxically enough, the internal divisions of the group into some 80 emirates and many other strong tribal entities.[3] The Kurds were too fragmented to challenge the old and new

[2] Boris James (2014) *Les Kurdes dans l'Orient mamelouk et mongol de 1250 à 1340: Entre marginalisation et autonomie* [Kurds in the Mameluk and Mongol East from 1250 to 1340: Between marginalization and autonomy] PhD dissertation, University of Paris X.

[3] Cf. Thomas Ripper (2000) *Die Marwaniden von Diar Bakr. Eine Kurdische Dynastie im islamischen Mittelalter* [The Marwanides of Diar Bakr. A Kurdish Dynasty in the Medieval Islam] (Wüzburg: Ergon-Verlag).

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imperial forces but still strong enough to occupy vast territories and more importantly to be classified as a unique ethnic group by the Empires and able to elaborate a group-awareness.

This double dynamic of division, between the Empires and within the group, and unity in spite of this fragmentation, was reactivated under Ottoman and Iranian rule. Obviously, the irruption of the Safavi dynasty (in 1501) had a messianic impact on the Turkmen tribes in the Ottoman Empire, and this constituted one of the major reasons behind the Ottoman expansion toward the south. In the end, even if the Iranian forces were defeated, their Safavi Empire in Iran consolidated as a Shia entity while the Ottoman Empire became a Sunni orthodox one. Still, both empires needed a stable but fluid frontier zone, one that the Kurds easily could provide.[4] After the rule of Mehmed II (1451–1481), the Ottoman Empire destroyed tribal affiliations within the Turkish population, but for a variety of reasons it preferred to keep an indirect rule elsewhere, namely in Kurdistan, and later on in the Arab lands. With their stable emirates, which swore allegiance to the sultan, the Kurds enjoyed a fragmented autonomy. That was even more the case in Iran where the state, which was much less centralized, needed strong allies to provide security, and, to a lesser extent, some fiscal resources.[5] In both cases the Kurds simultaneously could be integrated into the imperial entities and differentiated from them thanks to the strength of a double barrier. Although they spoke a language that was close to Persian, the majority of Kurds were not Shia. Their Sunnism, on the other hand, was not exclusive enough to allow the integration of this linguistically distinct group to 'Turkishness,' a goal that the Ottoman sultans never envisioned to reach.

It is quite difficult to know what kind of subjectivities the Kurdish actors had of their condition during this period. It is evident, however, that they internalized the imperial status of their time. Still, the well-known *Sharafname* (1597/8) shows that Kurds had a clear idea of their unity as *Kurds* and their genealogy as a historical group with continuity across the imperial borders. Although elaborated in the nineteenth century, the family narrative of the Bedirxan dynasty also attests that the Kurds tried to attach their origins to the Prophet, acquiring thus a status of nobility that the Ottoman sovereigns never pretended to have.[6] Also, *Mem-û-Zin* (1692), the famous Kurdish narrative poem, shows that although very small in number, some Kurdish elites were aware that as Kurds they not only were different from, but also dominated by the 'Rums' (Ottoman Turks) and the 'Tajiks' (Persians). The author of this poem, Ahmed-e Xani (1651–1707), also complained bitterly about the lack of unity among the Kurds, which had, in his reading, deprived them of the possibility of creating their own state. This discourse with astonishingly nationalist tones is similar to the quite harsh polemic among contemporary scholars of the Kurdish issue.[7] In reality, as the fourteenth-century *History* of Ibn Khaldûn shows, relations between ethnic groups are relations of power and domination, and the idea of ethnicity was well present in the Islamic world.[8]

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[4] N. Göyünç & W-D Hütteroth (1997) *Land an der Grenze. Osmanische Verwaltung im heutigen Türkisch-Syrisch-Irakischen Grenzgebietim 16. Jahrhundert* [Land on the Border. The Ottoman Administration of the Current Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi Border Zone in the 16th Century] (Istanbul: Eren Yayincilik).

[5] Sheerin Ardalan (2004) *Les Kurdes d'Ardalan entre la Perse et l'Empire ottoman* [The Kurds of Ardalan between Iran and the Ottoman Empire] (Paris: Geuthner).

[6] Cf. Lütfi (A. Ramiz) (2007) *20. Yüzyılın Başlarında Kürt Milliyetçiliği Söylemine Bir Örnek* [Example of Kurdish Nationalist Discourse in the Beginning of the 20th century] (Istanbul: BGST Yayınları).

[7] Cf. A. Vali (ed.) (2003) *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda).

[8] Cf. Ibn Khaldûn (1958) *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (New York: Pantheon Books).

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The Nineteenth Century

This inter-imperial position of the Kurds, which lasted until the nineteenth century, became more complex with the expansion of Russia as a third imperial force in the region. Many Kurds fell under the sovereignty of the Russian Empire without cutting their links with those who remained subjects of Iran or the Ottoman Empire. But the nineteenth century was an important period also for other reasons: the process of reforms and centralization that both the Iranian and Ottoman Empires undertook in the beginning of the century had been more or less successful, but required a new approach to their imperial peripheries.[9] In the Ottoman Empire, which was been marked by the *Tanzimat* ('Reorganizations') and *réveil des nationalités* ('awakening of the nationalities'), the establishment of the autocratic regime of Abdülhamid II and the wide-scale massacres of Armenians between 1894–1896 constituted some of the dramatic ruptures that occurred during this century. Both in the Ottoman and Iranian Empires, the Kurdish emirates were dismantled; the revolts undertaken by the *mir*s in the Ottoman Empire, which occasionally also had an anti-Christian dimension, were brutally repressed.[10] The Ottoman administration expanded in the region but could not fill the vacuum left by the emirates. In some Arab parts of the empire, the region became re-tribalized. More importantly, Ottoman Kurdistan was *de facto* divided between the north, where the Armenian issue had a burning urgency, and the South.[11] This 'long nineteenth century' ended not in 1901, but by World War I and the Armenian genocide, which demonstrated the triumph of Social Darwinism within the ruling Unionist elite.[12]

Toward the end of this century the first Kurdish journal, *Kurdistan*, was published, and a rather fragile Kurdish nationalist milieu emerged. However, the Kurdish rebels of the nineteenth century were aware that they were, at once, Kurdish and Islamic. According to available Ottoman documents, they thought that they were oppressed because they were 'Kurds' and they fought a 'struggle for the Kurds' (*Kürd kavgası*). They also emphasized that they were Muslims and loyal subjects of the sultan, but that they were not protected by *their* own Islamic power, which, on the contrary, was betraying its past promises.[13] Hakan Özoğlu suggests that these rebellions, which were not nationalist *per se*, played a decisive role in the formation of Kurdish nationalism.[14]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Kurdistan still was dominated by imperial structures, but it was no more in a world of classic empires. If Iran and Russia still remained empires, the central power in Istanbul did not identify itself with any imperial imaginary. Moreover, the Sublime Porte was an imperial power since it was recognized as the sole sovereign power in the Arab and Kurdish territories and was accepted as the ultimate decision-making center and arbiter.[15] Moreover, Turanian utopian dreams consisted of

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[9] Cf. Janet Klein (2011), *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press).

[10] Joost Jongerden & Jelle Verheij (eds) (2012), *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870–1925* (Leiden & Boston: Brill).

[11] Kürt Tarihi Araştımaları (2011) *Osmanlı Kürdistanı* [Ottoman Kurdistan] (Istanbul: BGST).

[12] Cf. Hamit Bozarslan (2017) An Overview of Kurdistan of the 19th Century, in: Michael M. Gunter (ed.) *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

[13] Cf. Sinan Hakan (2007) *Osmanlı Arşiv Belgelerinde Kürtler ve Kürt Direnişleri (1817–1867)* [The Kurds and the Kurdish Resistance in the Ottoman Archival Documents] (Istanbul: Doz); and Ahmet Kardam (2011) *Cizre-Bohtan Beyi Bedirhan. Direniş ve İsyan Yılları* [English trans.] (Ankara: Dipnot).

[14] Hakan Özoğul (2004) *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State. Evolving Identities, Competiting Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press).

[15] Hans-Lukas Kieser, Kerem Öktem & Maurus Reinkowski (eds) (2015), *World War I and the end of the Ottomans, from the Balkan Wars to the Armenian Genocide* (London: I. B. Tauris).

unifying all Turks from the Balkans to Central Asia and largely dismissed the aspirations for decentralization, or even the demand of integration by its Arab and Kurdish populations. It is true that many Kurdish actors participated in the Armenian genocide of 1915, renewing thus the pact that linked them to Istanbul under Hamidian rule. This feeling of abandonment, followed by the deportation of some 600,000 Kurds after the genocide, created a region-wide bitterness, quite similar to what one could observe in the Arab provinces of the empire.

Post-World War I Kurdistan: A regime of inter-state domination

I will not be able to analyze the intra- and extra-Kurdish factors that prevented the creation of a Kurdish entity in the aftermath of World War I. Suffice to say that in this period of uncertainty, the idea of belonging primordially to the Kurdish nation was far too weak, or at least, coexisted with strong Islamic, and therefore, Ottoman affiliations. Many Kurdish dignitaries in Northern Kurdistan had participated to the Armenian genocide. Even among those who could be defined as Kurdish nationalists, such as Seyyid Abdulkadir (1851–1925), leader of the Kurd Teâli Cemiyeti [Kurdish Elevation Society], feared the prospect of creating an Armenian state. While advocating for Kurdish autonomy, they were also strongly attached to the caliphate, which they considered as the sole guarantee for the survival of the Muslim community. In the territories that fell under British and French control, many Kurdish actors, including those who presented themselves as 'Kurdists' such as Mahmud Barzandji (1878–1956), thought, until the Lausanne Treaty was signed in July 1923, that the survival of the Ottoman Empire and the caliphate constituted the only condition for re-unification of Kurdistan. However, Southern Kurdistan and the Djazira regions constituted truly decisive lands either for the viability or for the demographic reinforcement of Iraq and Syria. France and Great Britain, which paid a very heavy price during World War I, had no more energy or will to prevent the ascension of the Kemalist forces in Turkey. Yet, they could not abandon the mandate territories, which constituted the only *Ottoman* booties that they had obtained from the war. Kurdistan, thus, became the victim of a worldwide domination system, which was ready to honor Turkey as a 'former-enemy' and henceforth member of the community of states, but denied any right to the Kurds or the formerly Ottoman Arabs whose armed contests were, at best, termed as acts of 'banditry' and were not seen as political/national contests.

What was the status of the Kurds in this divided Kurdistan after World War I? It is certain that both in Iran and Turkey, as well as in the newly founded mandates of Iraq and Syria, the Kurds became a status-less minority, not because they constituted a numeric minority in their own territories where they had an overwhelming majority, but because they were deprived of equal rights with the dominant Persian, Turkish and Arab communities. The ruling elites of these countries imposed the nationalism of the dominant groups as the very basis of their 'nation-building' processes. Majid Jaffar suggested that Kurdistan in Turkey was deliberately left in the status of an 'under-under developed' country.[16] This remark could also be applied to the other parts of Kurdistan. The well-known Turkish sociologist Ismail Beşikçi described this new-order as an 'inter-state colonialism.'[17] I would like to emphasize two features pointed out respectively by Jaffar and Beşikçi: The new order imposed not only a nationalist state's domination in each part of Kurdistan, which had long-term structuring

[16] Majeed R. Jafar (1976) *Under-underdevelopment: A Regional Case Study of the Kurdish Areas in Turkey* (Helsinki: Painoprint).

[17] Ismail Besikçi (1990) *Devletlerarasi Sömürge: Kürdistan/ Bilim, Resmi Ideoloji, Devlet, Demokrasi ve Kürt Sorunu* [The inter-state colony: Kurdistan/sciences, official ideology, state, democracy and the Kurdish issue] (Paris: Institut kurde de Paris).

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effects on the political, social, cultural, and economic fields, but also an inter-state security regime which defined the region-wide Kurdistan as a zone of permanent regime of exception. With the exceptions of the short-lasting Iranian support to the Ararat rebellion in the first half of 1930 and to the Barzani rebellion in 1974–1975, there was indeed a perfect cooperation between these states against Kurdish resistance that the Treaty of Sadabad, signed on July 8, 1937, by Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, reduced to the subversion of armed bands.[18] The 1930 Revolt was suppressed by regional cooperation including not only Turkey but also Iran and the British authorities in Iraq, with the indirect contribution of the Soviet Union and the French authorities in Syria. The Barzani uprising also was unsuccessful due to the withdrawal of Iranian support.

These seven decades have witnessed important and often brutal changes in these countries, such as military coups, revolutions, establishment of single-party regimes or wide-scale violence. The Kurdish areas widely speaking have also become theatres of two waves of armed struggle with very distinct sociological profiles, first between 1919 and 1946, and then after Mustafa Barzani's 1961 revolt. It naturally would be difficult to compare the demographic data, the elite-structures or class relations in Kurdistan, or the political culture or forms of the Kurdish contest of the 1920s with those of the 1960s–1980s. Still, if one takes a long-term retrospective look, one can also see that the basic determinants of the Kurdish issue remained unchanged throughout these decades. First of all, the states consolidated themselves and extended their control over Kurdistan, which gradually has been integrated to the countries' economic and political structures. They also kept their capacity in having a Kurdish reservoir of militia forces, recruited namely, but not exclusively, among the members of the tribal world.[19] Many tribes as well as urban dignitaries, in fact, accepted, either under constraint or willingly, to cooperate with them. But the main form that the Kurdish populations took was intra-state mobility, leading to the formation of large Kurdish communities in Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo, Istanbul, Ankara or Adana. These migrants were the educated Kurds with knowledge of the official languages as the only allowed ones in these major cities. According to the political evolution of each country, the Kurds also took part in the political process such as the one that started in 1946 in Turkey with the pluralist election system.

Although the four countries shared many common points, including authoritarianism, they were also strongly differentiated through their specific political cultures and landmarks, such as Kemalism, Ba'athism, monarchy or Islamic regime, state nationalisms, or official languages that the Kurds had to challenge or live with. If it happened that the Kurds from the four parts of Kurdistan read the same literature, as was the case of left wing literature in the 1950s–1970s, they did it in Arabic, Persian or Turkish, in order to fight against different political groups, such as the monarchy in Iran, the Grey Wolves in Turkey or the two distinct Baathist traditions in Syria and in Iraq. From this point of view, there is no doubt that the re-founded Iranian and post-Ottoman Turkish states, and the newly founded Iraqi and Syrian states have constituted highly integrative frameworks and were successful enough to differentiate radically the four segments of the Kurdish society, including the Kurdish movements. The problem, however, was that this integration was a highly discriminatory one, and was based on the exclusion of the Kurds from any equal rights or any genuine system of representation. That was a forced integration, which continued to define the group

[18] Cf. Ismail Soysal (1998) 1937 Saad-Abad Pact, *Studies on Turkish-Arab Relations*, no. 3, 1988, pp.154–157.
[19] See, for instance, on the 250,000 men strong Fursan as-Salahaddin in Iraq, David Keen (1993) *The Kurds in Iraq: How Safe is their Haven now?* (London: Save the Children), p. 60.

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it wanted to integrate as a 'national security threat,' or under the Social-Darwinian Kemalist and Baathist regimes as a 'vital' threat to the biologically defined nation's survival.[20]

Thus, much more than the past imperial integration, the integration into the twentieth century states reinforced and radicalized the Kurdish contest. It is true that all the armed (and unarmed) opposition that took place from the 1920s to the 1970s could not be explained by Kurdish nationalist demands or ideals. Many actors opted for armed struggle either because they were against the state as a centralizing and coercive power that intervened in the 'people's life' through education and un-Islamic 'civilizational measures,' or because the militarized inter-state borders cut the social and economic ties of many tribes and families which previously were unified. Still, the Kurdish intelligentsia, which openly had a Kurdist agenda and contested the states fundamentally because they were *non-Kurdish states*, gradually become the leading actor in the contest and was able, namely after the 1960s, to mobilize urban social groups, including the lower strata. Thus, the 'Kurdist dynamic' first was propelled by an urban intelligentsia but could only mobilize rural actors before winning an almost hegemonic position within the urban centers.

Another important feature is that, despite many Kurdish contests having merely a local dimension, the Kurdish movement more broadly developed as a trans-border one. The Barzanji, Simko, Ararat, Mahabad and Barzani revolts in fact had mobilized Kurds in the other countries or exerted a Kurdistan-wide impact. Through reading documents and memoirs from these decades, one gets the impression that the Kurdish movement tried to overcome, with non-negligible success, the division of Kurdistan by elaborating a common language, a cartographic imaginary, a common flag, shared myths, a national Pantheon, and a largely unified historiographical discourse. The unity that had been lost on the ground has been re-established on a symbolic level.[21] It is worth noting that these symbols, which were present already by the 1920s, have remained as unifying and radicalizing ones up to the present. From this point of view, these decades of the twentieth century witnessed the preservation, but also the radicalization of a long-term, imperial legacy. As already mentioned, the division of the Kurds between the Ottoman and Iranian Empires did not erase their awareness that they constituted a distinct entity. Still, in a context in which intra-Kurdish mobility was not threatened, this discourse could not become a unifying one, and even less a politically meaningful one until the Shayk Ubeydullah revolt of 1880.[22] Under the rule of the twentieth century states, however, the intra-Kurdish divisions have become complex and deepened to the point of breaking any internal fluidity, but the demand for unity also has produced real transformative effects that could express themselves only through violent means of expression.

The chronology of the years between the 1920s and 1960s is partly accountable for the Kurdish radicalization throughout these decades. The 1920s and 1930s are indeed the years of incessant revolts in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, and which were suppressed with great brutality. That is also the case of the autonomous Republic of Mahabad, which survived for only 11

[20] Cf. for the documents, Mehmet Bayrak (1993) *Kürtler ve Ulusal Demokratik Mücadeleleri. Gizli Belgeler-Araştırmalar-Notlar* [The Kurds and their National Democratic Struggles. Secret Documents, Researches and Notes] (Ankara: Öz-Ge); and Middle East Watch (1994), *Bureaucracy of Repression: The Iraqi Government in its Own Words* (Washington & New York: Middle East Watch).

[21] Cf. Martin Strohmeier (2003) *Crucial Images in the Presentation of a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and Patriots, Traitors and Foes* (Leiden: Brill); and Maria T. O'Shea (2004) *Trapped Between the Map and Reality. Cartography and Perceptions of Kurdistan* (New York & London: Routledge).

[22] Cf. Celîle Celîl (2002) *13 Rûpelen Balkeş ji Diroka Gelê Kurd* [13 Interesting Pages from the History of the Kurdish People] (Vienna: Instituya Kurdzanîye), pp. 33–34.

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months during 1946 in Iran. These revolts reinforced the sentiment of constituting one single national community facing the same enemies and a shared national tragedy. The beginning of the Barzani uprising in Iraq in 1961 constituted yet another common 'national' landmark but also, for the first time in the twentieth century, a horizon of collective delivery which had tremendous mobilizing effects among the Kurds in Iran, Syria and Turkey. The unexpected defeat of this revolt in 1975 after the withdrawal of Iranian support while it was militarily still very strong**,** also has been perceived as a national tragedy, and it produced radicalizing effects throughout Kurdistan.

Another reason for this continuous radicalization can be found in the access of the Kurds to the new political ideas, discourses and imaginaries through education, the press and after the 1950s the transistors. It is obvious that at the beginning of this long period, the Kurdish movement had no clear-cut ideological affiliations. Its radicalization could be defined as spontaneous, such as the ones that could be observed in Iran and in the entire post-Ottoman provinces ruled by British and French forces. Shayk Said in Turkey, for instance, was a religious figure who defended the Kurdish cause as the very condition for the protection of Islam, which was, according to him, being abandoned under the Kemalist rule. Even by then, however, many well-known Kurdist figures, such as Fehmî-e Bilal, Said's personal secretary, shared rather the same 'Westernized' sociological profile with the other Turkish or Arab members of the former Ottoman intelligentsia. 'Occidentalism' constituted indeed the *per default* ideology of the Kurdish movement until the Kurds' encounter with left wing ideas after the foundation of the Mahabad Republic, which took place while the Soviet Army was occupying neighboring Azerbaijan,[23] and prior to the political upheavals that took place in Iraq and Syria in the turn of the 1950s. In spite of the prestige of some of its conservative figures, including Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the revolt that would bear his name by the 1960s, the Kurdish movement by and large became associated with left wing ideas. As with many other minorities throughout the world, the Kurds too were sensitive to a universal cause, political and symbolic language, which the left then was the only one able to propose. The left-wing commitment also meant a refusal of nationalism, which went hand-in-hand with the defense of a national cause. It is remarkable to observe that with some exceptions, no Kurdish thinker or political leader advocated the term Kurdish nationalism as such. Quite the contrary, they presented their struggle as an anti-nationalist struggle in essence, the only one allowing for the 'fraternity of peoples' and thus, allowing to leave behind nationalism as a parochial ideology and discourse of domination.[24] It is also important to stress that in the 1980s, with the relative exception of the Palestinian case, Kurdistan remained the only Middle Eastern sphere where the left-wing movements continued to be dominant. If it is true that during this period some Kurdish militants, among them the well-known Mullah Krekar, joined the Afghan Jihad and Islamist Kurdish movements have been formed both in Iraq and in Turkey, they were and still remain extremely marginal.

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[23] G. Moradi (1989) *Ein Jahr autonome Reigerung in Kurdistan. Die Mahabad Republik 1946–1947. Geschichte der Kurdischen Aufsandsbewegung von den arabisch-islamischen Invasion bis zur Mahabad Republic* [One year of autonomous government in Kurdistan: The Mahabad Republic 1946–1947, History of the Kurdish resistance movement from the Arabic/Islamic invasion to the Mahabad Republic] (PhD dissertation, University of Heidelberg).

[24] Cf. H. Bozarslan (2007) Türkiye'de Kürt Sol Hareketi [Kurdish left-wing movement in Turkey], *Türkiye'de Siyasi Düsünce* [Political Thought in Turkey] (Istanbul, Iletisim), 8, pp. 1167–1207.

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1979–1991: The Years of Radical Changes

The second half of the 1970s was a decisive time period for the Kurdish movement. The military *coup d'état* of 1971 in Turkey, which destroyed any hope for democratic changes through constitutional/parliamentarian rules, and the failure of the Barzani revolt in 1975, led to the creation of new Kurdish movements, among them the PUK and the PKK, the first one being rather elitist, the second one clearly plebian, but both mobilizing mainly urban youth. The 1979 Revolution in Iran propelled yet another organization dominated by the young militants, the *Komaleh*, which already was active during the pre-revolutionary period and challenged the Iranian Democratic Party of Kurdistan. The generational gap, reinforced by class dynamics, thus, became one of the main factors in the constitution of the extra-legal Kurdish space.

The year 1979, which also was marked by the Camp David Agreement between Egypt and Israel and the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union's Red Army, constituted the beginning both of a short historical cycle in the Greater Middle East, that lasted until the end of the 1980s, and a long historical cycle which continued until the Arab revolutionary contests of 2011.[25] The short cycle was determined both by the ascension of Islamism in the Middle East and by the Afghanistan and Iran-Iraq War, as well as the intensification of the Lebanese civil war. This period not only witnessed the 'enlargement' of the Middle East toward other Muslim countries through the participation of tens of thousands of Arab militants from the Maghrib and the Mashreq in the Afghan War, but also a period of crisis of the Westphalian states in the Middle East. While the inter-state frontiers became zones of production of an intense violence, the distinction between state and non-state actors tended to blur and armed groups won an increasing mobility. While the states were not any more the masters of their territoriality, war and violent contests have been articulated. This articulation largely has transformed the basic data of the Kurdish issue.

With a new revolt that the KDP and PUK launched in 1975 in Iraq, the foundation of the PKK in 1978 in Turkey, and the beginning of its large-scale armed struggle in 1984, and the Iranian revolution and consequent Kurdish guerilla warfare in 1979, Kurdistan entered into a decade of violence. The states' repression, which reached its acme in Iraq with the Anfal operations in 1988, probably claimed 200,000 victims in the 1980s alone. Many observers had the impression that the Kurds' physical survival itself was in danger. The Kurdish subjectivities of this decade were quite dark for yet another reason. The fragmented Kurdish movements had become the unwilling military allies of the conflicting states. While Iran was hosting and arming the Iraqi Kurds, the Saddam Hussein regime was welcoming the Iranian Kurdish guerilla groups. Syria, on the other hand, supported both the PKK and the Iraqi Kurdish movements.[26] As Abbas Vali suggested almost one decade after the beginning of the 'dark 1980s,' the fragmented Kurdish identity indeed produced fragmented politics.[27] The state of war, in fact, meant the end of inter-state security pacts against the Kurdish movement, which with some exceptions had prevailed since the 1920s, but as a heavy burden for the Kurds, it also deepened internal divisions in the Kurdish movement, which only could lead to internal bloodshed.

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[25] Cf. H. Bozarslan (2012) Revisiting Middle East's 1979, *Economy and Society*, 41(4), pp. 558–567.

[26] Martin M. van Bruinessen (1988) The Kurds Between Iran and Iraq, *Middle East Research and Information Project Report*, July–August, pp. 14–27.

[27] Abbas Vali (1989) The Kurds and Their 'Others': Fragmented identity and Fragmented Politics, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 18(2), pp. 83–94.

There is no doubt that the tragedies of this decade have also been recorded by Kurdish historiography as national tragedies. Still, the lost unity weakened Kurdish national feelings as well as the Kurdish organizations that, at best, could hope for their survival as exiled armed groups. The price paid indeed was high for all of them: By the end of the decade, while the Iranian Kurdish organizations were constrained to adopt a rather low profile, the future of the Iraqi ones was compromised by the extremely heavy consequences of the chemical war, which destroyed the very landscape where a resistance could still be possible. In Turkey, the PKK had been weakened by an increasing military repression and policy of scorched earth applied after 1987 before winning a new momentum in the beginning of the 1990s.

It is, however, also remarkable to observe that in spite of this dark panorama, what one could call the region-wide Kurdish resistance kept enough resources to survive. In Iran, they lost ground and were heavily affected by the assassination of Kurdish leaders Abdurrahman Gassemlou in 1989 in Vienna and Said Sharafkandi in 1992 in Berlin. Nevertheless, the Iranian Kurdish society gave birth to an extremely dynamic intellectual and cultural 'civil society' and broadly speaking to actors identifying themselves with Kurdishness. In Iraq, Kurdish society suffered heavily from the consequences of George Bush's decision to maintain Saddam Hussein in power. Nearly two million Kurds, who were afraid of the possible use of chemical bombs by Baghdad fled toward Iran and Turkey before an unexpected *coup de theater* that lead the United Nations to create a Kurdish 'safe haven' in the three northern provinces of Iraq (UN resolution 688, April 5th, 1991). The region thus was able to access a long-lasting regional autonomy. In Turkey, not only has the PKK survived, but a Kurdish legal movement, organized under the label of HEP [Labor Party of the People], was able to emerge as one of the country's most dynamic political forces; it would have its ultimate avatar in HDP. More importantly, the extreme internal differentiations of the Kurdish space in the 1980s have been minimized through the reinforcement of Kurdish national feelings. The three Kurdistans (as well as the Kurdish regions in Syria) have become micro-climates where Kurdishness constitutes the main source of legitimization. Notwithstanding the intra-Kurdish conflicts, each symbolic moment of repression has been recorded as a national tragedy in the entirety of Kurdistan. The leaders of this period, Ghassemlou and Sharafkandi (Iran), Barzani and Talabani (Iraq), and Öcalan (Turkey) have been integrated into Kurdish history-writing as Kurdish national leaders.

The Kurdish group broadly speaking thus appeared to be at once the loser and the winner of the state of war and violence in the Middle East of 1980s. It is true that a bloody war opposed the PKK and the Iraqi Kurdish organizations between 1992 and 1994, and intra-Kurdish conflict between the two major Iraqi Kurdish parties, the DPK and the PUK between 1994 and 1996. Still, the reunified KRG, which was—and still is—dominated by the KDP, and the PKK gradually would re-emerge as the structuring actors of the post-war Kurdistan, acting as the centripetal forces also attracting other Kurdish initiatives in Iran and in Syria. Henceforth, in the unproclaimed and informal Kurdish 'regional political space,' which was, and still is, at once conflicted and regulated, the KRG and the PKK could play the role of *primus inter pares* and ultimate arbiters. Thus, once again one could observe that fragmentation and unity formed a dialectic relation, reinforcing each other rather than atomizing or homogenizing the Kurdish space.

However, one should emphasize that the ideological differences between these two forces have also been sharpened throughout the 1990s. While Iraqi Kurdistan was evolving in an environment marked by liberalism and partly by social-conservatism (which did not allow the Islamist movements to break their marginality), the PKK has reinforced its Fanonian features, promoting the use of violence not simply to reach national liberation, but more insistently,

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in order to fulfill the ideal of the reformation of Kurdishness on a sacrificial basis. It also has used internal 'disciplinary' violence as a process means of building the 'new Kurds'[28] and developed a cult of personality. At the same time, however, it gave birth to political, civil and widely pacific resistance, the effects of which went well beyond party affiliations and guerilla warfare.[29] These dynamics could/can be observed through the emergence of a strong feminist movement, and massive participation of Kurdish youth in the mobilization process. Thanks to these dynamics, the PKK was able to overcome the worst crisis it ever faced, i.e., the kidnapping of Abdullah Öcalan by Turkish Special Forces in Kenya in 1999. It also has given birth to two affiliated parties, PYD (in Syria) and PJAK (in Iran).

1991–2011: Toward the End of the Twentieth-Century Middle East

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the consequent Gulf War in 1991 had important, yet limited macro-level consequences in the region. Obviously, the prospects for democratization of the Middle East, after the waves of regime changes in Latin America and Eastern Europe, as some observers hoped for, has been postponed. Instead, as the Algerian civil war, the Islamist guerillas in Egypt and ultimately the 9/11 process showed, Islamist radicalism has been reinforced to the point of jeopardizing the region's political evolution. Still, the regimes, including that of Saddam Hussein, appeared to be viable and even have consolidated themselves. Saddam's power would come to an end after the Anglo-American occupation of 2003, but the Bashar al-Assad regime survived despite the consequences of the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, which obliged Damascus to withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

The Arab regimes' apparent stability was, however due to, at least partly, a widely shared illusion. The post 9/11 world-order classified some anti-Western regimes, namely Iran and Syria as members of the 'axis of evil' but froze them in their highly repressive forms, and brought precious security rent to the pro-Western authoritarian regimes such as Egypt and Yemen. But none of these regimes was able to overcome its structural contradictions to renew its political elites or to integrate economically and politically its society. In spite of their multiple security organs, the states remained weakly institutionalized, the societies also remained largely unintegrated and depoliticized. Moreover, the dynamics behind the crisis of the 1980s and their consequences such as the structural fragility of the Westphalian states, region-wide struggles for hegemony and sectarian conflicts did not disappear. On the contrary, they have been aggravated by the confiscation of resources by the power-holders, the worldwide Jihadi movement, and the transformation of the power-holders into real kleptomanias, who lost all legitimacy. The 2011 uprisings aimed at the overcoming of the political blockages, authoritarianism, state of violence and generalized social fatigue, but their failure has unleashed massive self-destructive dynamics marked by a high level of violence in Egypt, but particularly in some of the states founded in the twentieth century: Libya, Yemen, Syria, and continuing from pre-2011, in Iraq.

In contrast to this state of violence, Kurdistan of 2011–2014 seemed not only to be pacified but also prosperous and promising.[30] In spite of its chronic political crisis, Iraqi

[28] Cf. Paul J. White (2000) *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers? The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey* (London: Zed Books).

[29] Cf. Nicole Watts (2009) *Activists in Office: Kurdish Ethnic Politics, Political Resources, and Repression in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

[30] For a general overview, cf. Ofra Bengio (ed.) (2014) *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin: University of Texas Press).

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Kurdistan was able to maintain its stability. It became totally dependent on Turkey for its economy, including its basic agricultural needs, but it also profited from its position as a zone of transit between Turkey and the Arab world, and seemed to be able to impose itself as a middle-sized oil producer. Similarly, the Kurdish regions seemed to be spared by the violence of the civil war in Syria. In July 2012, the Bashar al-Assad regime even decided to withdraw the main bulk of its forces from Syrian Kurdistan.[31] This decision was due to the incapacity of its power to control this territory and the need to focus on the most strategic zones, as well as Assad's willingness to punish Turkey, which was actively supporting the Syrian armed opposition, by leaving Syria's Kurdish zones to a pro-PKK actor, i.e., the PYD. During the same period, the pro-PKK Iranian Kurdish PJAK [Party of Free Life in Kurdistan] had negotiated a ceasefire with Tehran. Also in Turkey things seemed to improve when at the end of 2013 the Erdogan government *de facto* rehabilitated the still imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan and initiated peace-talks with the PKK.[32] One could thus say that a process of Kurdish empowerment was on throughout the entirety of Kurdistan. For the first time in a century, the prospect of a negotiated solution of the Kurdish issue in three of the four countries involved could begin to be envisioned.

The Kurdish movement even seemed able to develop its own institutional assets, with a double contradictory and yet complementary political system. Iraqi Kurdistan was governed by a weak patrimonial and democratic system dominated by Barzani's PDK, while the Syrian region, under the rule of PYD leader Salih Muslim, was dominated by a hegemonic-representative one, which conformed to the theory of 'radical democracy' that Öcalan had developed in the 2000s under the influence of American thinker Murray Bookchin (1921–2006).[33] Although they had much more limited space to maneuver, the HDP (Democratic Party of the Peoples) in Turkish municipalities[34] worked according to the same model. What unified these two political systems, however, was that they were, on the one side, genuine Kurdish experiences of political autonomy and representation, and that on the other side they both imagined themselves as kinds of Athenian democracies in a collapsing Middle East. The Kurdish *peshmarga* and the PYD's defense-forces were mainly in charge of controlling inter-Iraqi and inter-Syrian frontiers. In both countries the Kurds were not taking part in the violence, which concerned mainly the Arab population divided along sectarian affiliations. For the first time, in fact, one could observe that the Kurdish and Arab political languages did not allow any translation from one to the other. That was not the case in Iran where the Kurdish movement was a part of a wider opposition, and in Turkey where the HDP seemed, for a while at least, able to bear both the Kurdish cause and the cause of democracy. Still, in both cases the Kurdish regions were sociologically differentiated from the 'national' landscape.

In 2014–2015, however, this double Kurdish system came under serious threat when the Kurds faced a double challenge in Iraq and in Syria. After its vertiginous territorial gains, the Islamic State attacked Sinjar (Chengal) hosting an important Yezidi minority that faced huge-scale massacres and enslavement of women, threatened Erbil and launched a

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[31] Cf. Jordi Tejel-Gorgas (2014) *La Question Kurde; Passé et Present* [The Kurdish Question: Past and Present] (Paris: L'Harmattan).

[32] Cf. Murat Aktas (ed.) (2014) *Catisma Süreçleri ve Baris* [Process of War and Peace] (Istanbul: Iletisim).

[33] Cf. Ahmet H. Akkaya & J. Jongerden (2012) Reassembling the Political: The PKK and the Project of Radical Democracy, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 12. Available at: https://ejts.revues.org/4615, accessed November 20, 2017).

[34] Cf. Cengiz Güneş & Welat Zeydanoglu (2014) *The Kurdish Question in Turkey: New Perspectives on Violence, Representation and Reconciliation* (London: Routledge).

particularly devastating offensive on Kobane. This new actor constituted an enigma that could not be understood through the conceptual tools of the classic Kurdish reading of the history and the Middle East. Refusing the existing frontiers, mobilizing tens of thousands of Jihad fighters from all over the world, having, at once, a rationality and a state-building capacity and a violent strategy that destroyed any kind of rationality, including the one needed for its own durability, ISIS could not be compare to any state or regime that the Kurds had experienced. It also posed a military challenge, which was unprecedented, and revealed the weakness of the Kurdish armed forces, thus obliging them to become a kind of Sparta and to re-militarize the Kurdish space.[35]

In Turkey, too, the 'Kurdish spring' appeared to be short-lived. Erdogan's Kurdish 'overture' was in fact a conditional one: In exchange for their recognition, he wanted the Kurds to renounce, both in Syria and in Turkey, any independent political line and to accept being at the service of Turkishness and Sunnism, i.e., its hegemonic bloc in Turkey and his hegemonic ambitions in the region. The refusal of this dictate, first by the Syrian PYD, which opted for an independent line, and of the Kurds in Turkey, who massively voted for the HDP in June and November 2015 elections, and not for his party, led to a new phase of brutal repression and destruction of the Kurdish urban landscape, as well as to a re-militarization of the Kurdish struggle.[36]

The Specificities of the 2010s

The post-2014 developments have not been the first time that the Kurds found themselves facing uncertainties, but this situation obviously has been of an entirely new kind. It is true that compared to the 1980s, Kurdish society had much stronger structures, important and autonomous military forces and some allies which enabled them, at least for a while, to resist the Jihadi forces in the region. However, the fate of the Yezidis of Sinjar, the battle of Kobane, and the destruction of the urban centers in Kurdistan of Turkey after the June 7, 2015 elections, show that violence was not only part of Kurdish society's past but also still constituted its hard reality. It also became obvious that the new waves of violence that the Kurdish movements had to face would not be limited to the frontier zones or to the rural areas but potentially target 75 percent of the Kurdish population.

For another reason too, the uncertainties of the 2010s were of a new kind: In the 1980s, the two 'super-powers,' which were engaged in open conflict in Afghanistan, were incapable of having an effective role either in the war between Iran and Iraq, or in the Lebanese civil war, and the local actors in Iran and Iraq, but also Syria, had a much wider autonomy of action than before. Today, while the post-Afghan and Iraq Wars United States has adopted a low-profile policy in the region, and the other Western powers do not have enough resources to be actively involved in the conflicts, Russia has become a decisive actor in Middle Eastern politics. More importantly, in contrast with the situation of the 1980s, two main protagonists of the Kurdish issue, Iraq and Syria, are not able to impose themselves as 'full-scale' actors and are obliged to accept the presence of Kurdish actors in the field. This 'simplification,' which may not last, is, undeniably, the most important change that has taken place in the

[35] Cf. H. Bozarslan (2014), The Kurds and Middle Eastern 'state of violence', 1980s and 2010s, *Kurdish Studies*, 2, pp. 4–13.

[36] Cf. among other contributions, Omer Tekdemir (2016) Politics of the Turkish Conflict: the Kurdish Issue, April 15. Available at: http://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/15/politics-of-the-turkish-conflict-the-kurdish-issue/, accessed November 20, 2017).

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evolution of the Kurdish issue since the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. But that also means that the Kurdish movement, broadly speaking, has to face, as it did before that fateful fatidic date of 1918, two major powers, Iran and Turkey, which are also the protagonists of a regional cold war. To be sure, the cold war between these two powers is not about the Kurdish issue as such; it has a much stronger sectarian dimension, but it takes room, among other spaces, in the buffer zone called Kurdistan. Both powers indeed, try to control the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistans as part of their struggle for the regional hegemony but also in order to master the game in these two countries. The condition for this is the suppression of any autonomous Kurdish will. However, one should emphasize that both powers have 'asymmetric' resources at their disposal: In contrast to the 1920s when Simko actively was supported by the emerging Ankara regime, Turkey of the 2010s, at least for time being, has almost no impact among the Iranian Kurds. Tehran, on the other hand, has some relations with the PKK and can stage a policy of military coexistence with it when and if necessary.[37] From this point of view, one has the impression that the pre-World War I pattern, which in the beginning of the sixteenth century, but also during the most of the nineteenth century, opposed the two empires with unequal potentialities for each of them, may become once again meaningful in the 2010s.

Another strong similarity with the nineteenth century, but also a sharp difference with the twentieth can be mentioned. The Middle East's fate in the twentieth century was largely determined by Western powers, first France and Great Britain, and later on the United States. The impact of the Soviet Union was limited in time (1950s–1980s) and in space (Iraq and Syria), but also in effectiveness. In the 2010s, however, one can hardly mention any significant European presence in the region. The American interventions have also limited themselves to a single target: the radical Jihadi organizations. In contrast, one observes that Russia plays a much more active role and alongside Iran and Turkey to the point of becoming a third regional power. This 'coming-back' involves an open conflict with Turkey, and the possibility of an alliance with Iran. More importantly, although in a very different demographic landscape, Russia appears to be directly involved, as in the nineteenth century, with both the Armenian and Kurdish issues. It is true that in the post-genocide context there is no more Armenian revolutionary organization active in Turkey, but Armenia as an independent but client state nevertheless hosts Russian bases and the PYD that Turkey declares as its primal enemy is a quasi-ally of Moscow. Significantly, the spectacular 'winter-rapprochement' between Russia and Turkey in 2016 did not push Moscow toward an 'anti-Kurdish' policy.[38]

Ironically enough, one century after World War I, the former 'Near East' has returned back to some (but certainly not all) of its 'fundamentals,' with the paralysis of the Arab states emerged during the twentieth century. It is obvious that throughout this century, the very nature of the Kurdish question has changed. While the 'Kurdish question' was the name of an uncertain Islamic affiliation and identity even after World War I, today, it is the name of a national question known worldwide. Moreover, while one century ago the Kurds hardly could be defined as the *actors* of their own destiny, today they are actors with a very high level of agency. It is true that they are still in a buffer zone, but they seem to have a

[37] Cf. namely *Bilal Wahab* Iran's Warming Relations with the PKK Could Destabilize the KRG. Available at: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-warming-relations-with-the-pkk-could-destabilize-the-krg, accessed November 20, 2017.

[38] Cf. namely Berkan Ögür & Zaba Baykal (2018) Understanding the 'Foreign Policy' of the PYD/YPG as a Non-state Actor in Syria and Beyond, in Murat Yesiltas & Tuncay Kardas (eds) *Non-State-Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology and Strategy*, pp. 43–75 (New York, Palgrave).

much higher degree understanding both their internal fragmentation and their unity, as the constitutive elements of their existence.

This agency equips the Kurdish movements with the capacity to read their past and to become a 'subject of history,' in other words, to grow a subjectivity, an awareness of the self's identity, no matter how imaginary it may be, an idea of collective rights linked to this identity and an ability to learn from one's own experiences. Becoming a subject of history also means developing a capacity of 'managing the present' and projecting oneself into the future. Here we see a clear shortcoming of the agency of the subordinated groups when they have to take part in extremely complex power struggles dominated by the major actors with international recognition but also with 'rough-state' behaviors, as is basically the case of Turkey and Iran, not even to mention Russia. In spite of their poor (and sometimes even extremely) poor condition, the subordinated groups can empower themselves when they act in pacified situations regulated by some kind of rule of law, but have limited margins of action when they have to act under violent circumstances. In the 1980s, for instance, the Kurds, as well as many other subordinated groups, such as the Palestinians or Iraqi Shia or Syrian Sunni actors, could have extremely sophisticated ideological and political discourses. They were also certainly able to read their past experiences and have an imaginary concerning their future, and yet, were deemed to act within a very limited space of maneuver. Their survival with some resources was what they could hope for.

Despite their alliance with some world powers, the armed forces at their disposal, their ideological sophistication promoting either 'Western liberal democracy' (Iraq) or 'radical democracy' (Syria, Turkey, and more and more Iran), today the Kurdish political elites find themselves in quite a similar situation as in the 1980s. They have to read their present in a context in which no scholarly or political authority is able to understand the nature of the ongoing crisis of disintegration. They certainly have an idea of what kind of future they want to reach, but in a context in which no one has the slightest idea of the new Middle East that may emerge on the horizon of the 2020s. They face simultaneously the reactivation of imperial dynamics that seemed to have become meaningless during their experiences in the twentieth century, the legacy of divisions among four states during the same century, and the eruption of forces such as the Islamic state, which are bearers of new forms of radicalization in the twenty-first century. Thus, the question that one might ask concerns the Kurdish movements' ability to maintain themselves on the edge and to manage their presence by demonstrating their unity while also managing their internal fragmentations and conflicts. It is obvious, however, that the answer to this question will not depend exclusively on their own will.

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